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C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 004003

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: A CONFERENCE OF SUNNI ARABS THAT SUPPORTS THE DRAFT CONSTITUTION

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert S. Ford for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

1. (C) Summary. A Sunni Arab tribal shaykh convened with help from President Talabani a September 23 conference at which the Sunni Arab political figures in attendance urged acceptance of the draft constitution and condemnation of terrorism. The conference was attended by 200 mostly Sunni leaders and NGO representatives, as well as by POL FSN. Former General/Iraqi National Salvation Movement leader Wafiq Al-Sameraee called on the participants to vote in the referendum noting that changes to the Constitution could be sought at a later date. The conference didn't get the biggest names among the Sunni Arab political leadership and President Talabani had a hand in putting it together. Nonetheless, the conference was notable because it showed there is not unanimity of opinion on the draft constitution within the Sunni Arab community. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Fasal Al-Gaoud, a Sunni tribal shaykh, former Allawi-appointed Governor of Anbar and Secretary General of the newly formed Iraqi Solidarity Council (ISC) organized a conference, held in Baghdad on September 23, to discuss the draft Iraqi Constitution. Under the theme of Iraqi unity in the new political and constitutional process, the four-hour conference, attended by POL FSN, attracted about 200 participants. Roughly 30 tribal leaders and shaykhs from Anbar and southern Iraq, fifteen mostly Sunni political leaders, and a large contingent of women's groups and other NGO representatives were in attendance.

3. (SBU) Gaoud said that the ISC would urge massive participation in upcoming elections. He further spoke of the need for non-sectarian unity in Iraq, condemned terrorist leaders including Zarkawi and announced that his party followers will participate in and vote for the draft Constitution.

4. (SBU) Former Major General Wafiq Al-Sameraee, representing President Talibani, said though a Sunni Arab, he respected the views of the majority. He did not call for either a "yes" or "no" vote on the constitution, but pointed out that the text could be amended at a later date. Pointing to the measured response to the Al-A'ima bridge incident in which up to 1000 Shia died in a stampede, he predicted that Iraqi would not have a civil war.

5. (SBU) Mithal Al-Alusi of the small Al-Uma party praised the draft constitution and spoke sarcastically of criticism from neighboring Arab countries of it. He asked them to compare the Iraqi draft text to their own constitutions, commenting that both Arab League Secretary General Mousa and the Saudi Foreign Minister were afraid of the Iraq constitution. He added that only 22 percent of Egyptians voted in the Presidential election whereas 58% of Iraqis voted for the Transitional National Assembly. Al-Alusi said Arab countries feared the political process in Iraq because they knew it could signal an end to their corrupt regimes. He condemned Zarkawi and all those who harbor him as criminals.

6. (SBU) Mubdir al-Weis, Secretary General of the Al-Whida (Unity) party called for a timetable for withdrawal of Coalition Forces in Iraq, saying that free elections should be held without occupation forces. He said that the elections could not be free without direct supervision by the UN, Islamic Organization and other independent international organizations.

7. (C) Comment: An aide to President Talabani, and Major General Sameraee himself told us that Talabani had helped finance the conference by paying the expenses of the participants. Those who attended were not prominent Sunni Arab political leaders. Gaoud quickly lost his governor's chair when the new Anbar Provincial Council chose a new governor in February. Mithal al-Alusi has a small following, but he is far more liberal than most in the Sunni Arab community. (His trip to Israel in 2004 caused a major stir.) While not representing the major Sunni political groupings, this conference was noteworthy for the number of Sunni politicians calling publicly for a "yes" vote on the draft Constitution. Pol FSN saw participants actively engaged in the debate, which touched on all the points important to us - the need to

participate in the political process and a strong  
condemnation of Zarkawi's terrorism. End Comment.  
Khalilzad